



THE ASSASSINATION HAS SHADOWED—BUT NOT DEFEATED—THE FAMILY OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD

by June Oswald Porter

There were three fateful murders during that weekend in Dallas 20 years ago. The first was that of President Kennedy. The second took the life of Dallas policeman J.D. Tippit, who was killed while attempting to arrest Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald, charged with that crime, was himself shot by nightclub owner Jack Ruby while being transferred to the county jail. The deaths left seven fatherless children—two were John Kennedy's, three were Patrolman Tippit's and two were Oswald's.



The author was born in the Soviet Union during Oswald's 2 1/2-year defection. She was her father's favorite.

Earlier this year PEOPLE talked with one of those survivors. She is June Oswald Porter, 21. After two decades, she said, she wanted to set the record straight about "what my family is really like and how we've been able to survive the last 20 years." A forthright, determined woman who still speaks in a soft Texas accent, June now lives in the Northeast, where she is finishing her college education. Here, for the first time, she tells, in her own words, about "What it was like to grow up with one of the most stigmatized names in American history."

When people find out that I am Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter, their first reaction is usually to express sympathy for how hard it must have been for me to grow up. Many assume that I have been shunned by society and by friends. In truth, there have been some difficult moments, but nothing like what one publication recently described as a "horrible, terror-filled life" for my younger sister Rachel and me. What people don't understand is that, as well as having a wonderful, deter-

mined mother, I have also had a loving stepfather and have grown up in communities that knew and accepted me and my family.

I'm 21 now, just about the same age my mother was when the Kennedy assassination thrust her into what must have been the most impossible of circumstances: a penniless Russian widow with two infant daughters, unable to speak English and virtually alone in a strange land. That my mom survived and even triumphed in spite of these circumstances is something I marvel at. She is the strongest person I have ever known, and I'm grateful that she instilled some of her strength in me. Whatever strength of character I possess comes from my mother's example, not from any attempt on my part to make up for my father.

I grew up accepting my heritage in a detached way. My life did not stop or change when I was first told who my father was, and I only vaguely remember the moment. I was 6 years old and about to start first grade when my mother sat between Rachel and me on the living room couch in our house in

Richardson, Texas and held my 2-year-old half-brother, Mark, in her lap. While I can't remember what she said, I do recall that it was very tender, and we were all crying, even Mark, who was much too young to understand. I didn't understand myself just what it meant to be Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter.

Mom rarely talked to us about her life with Lee, though there were occasional moments when she reflected on it in our presence. Once while we were driving down a highway near our house we passed a

shack that had been abandoned for years in the Texas heat. She looked at the building and said quietly, "I remember the day when it was my dream to have something like that just to call my own." Another time when I was young, she brought down from the attic a box of letters that people had written to her shortly after the assassination. The letters were touching, many expressing condolences for our loss or sympathy for Mom's situation. She told us that many had contained money from people who knew how poor we were. Mother told us how good the American people were to us when they had no reason to be.

Though there are still many mysteries concerning my father, one fact is that in the 21 months we had together, he loved me very much. People who saw us together have commented to the press about how much he loved me and how he played with me constantly. Over the years, when I have thought of him, it has been to miss him as any daughter would miss a lost parent. But I have not grown up fatherless. When I was 3, Mom married Kenneth Porter,

Photographs by Michael Mauney

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now a carpenter, whom she met in Richardson in 1965. He is the man who was always there and represents all the things a father should be. Though my legal name remains June Oswald, I have always used the name Porter out of love and respect for my stepfather.

Because I had so many people around who cared, and a mother and stepfather who both loved me, I was never driven to read what people wrote about my father or be overly inquisitive about him. When Mom talks about him she uses his name, Lee. Lat-

er, when I would talk of him, that's the name I used. "Dad" always meant my stepfather. It was surprising to me when someone questioned the idea of my referring to "Lee." I had never thought about it before, but he was Lee to everyone else, and he is Lee to me, too.

The people of the Texas towns in which I grew up, Richardson and Rockwall, were also important in helping me feel free of any stigma. It was not until I left home for college that I fully realized the problems of being an Oswald. Even though Rockwall (pop. 5,000) was much smaller than Richardson and ev-

everyone knew everything about everybody, there still would have been no need to hide our identity. To my best recollection, in all those years only one rather frustrated physical education teacher ever confronted me with resentment about my family.

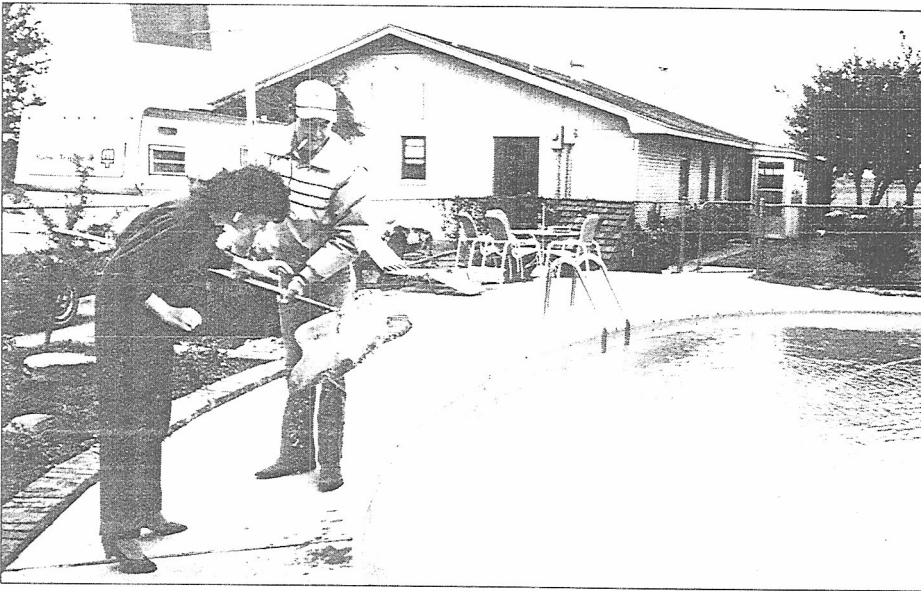
I had tried out for the school drill team in the seventh grade and didn't make it. The next year I joined the newly created girl's basketball team and really loved it. I became quite verbose about my dislike for the drill team, and my comments got back to the Phys. ed. teacher who was in charge of it. She called me into her office and asked me what I had been saying, and when I told her, the conversation quickly degenerated into a match where we were both trying to hurt each other. She said that I could not deal with being Lee's daughter. Our meeting turned into an awful scene, and I left in tears. But that was an isolated incident. My classmates not only accepted who I was, but in one case, during a basketball game when some fans of an opposing team were pointing me out as "Oswald's kid," the Rockwall students spoke up for me.

The only other time during my early schooling that I can recall being singled out as Lee Oswald's daughter occurred when my second grade class was studying the American Presidents. I was asked to go across the hall to another room when the time came to study President Kennedy.

My desire to be a writer has been another factor in keeping my focus on the future and not immersed in past events. My only ambition has been to write. In the beginning I idolized the reporters and writers who were often hovering around us. Later, as I read their stories, I had to come to grips with the reality of what they were doing. They always seemed to be looking for something, and if it wasn't there, they would simply make things up.

A particularly flagrant example of this occurred one day when a reporter from the *Dallas Morning News* came to our house in Rockwall looking for a story. We knew she was a reporter the instant she parked her car at the end of the road and walked up our long driveway to the front door—all our

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On a trip back to her hometown of Rockwall, Texas, June checks out the pool with stepfather Kenneth Porter. At left, the Porter family: half-brother Mark, 17, sister Rachel, 20, June, Marina, 42, and Ken, 45.

friends came through the side entrance of the house. Mom met her at the door and explained very nicely that she wasn't giving any interviews. The reporter became quite insistent and started complaining about having come all the way from Dallas [21 miles]. But Mom stood firm, and the woman left in about five minutes. To our surprise next Sunday morning, the paper carried a big feature story about us written by this woman. It described our huge ranch with a "lake" in front (our huge ranch is 17 acres with a one-story brick house, and the "lake" is a pond in the front yard that is dried up most of the time). Although the reporter had never stepped a foot inside the house, the article went on to describe the interior sections of the house as if she had been inside for hours.

Sometimes our "reporter problems" were of our own making. Because we felt safe and sheltered in Rockwall, we weren't always as cautious as we should have been. On the night of my sister's first date and her first big dance, my mother, Rachel and I were waiting for her date's parents to arrive to take her to the dance when a car drove up, and a man got out with a camera. Mom thought the daddy was going to take pictures, and she was exuberant. The man came up smiling, and Mom said, "Hi, I'm Marina. You brought a camera, how sweet." The surprised stranger said, "You don't mind if I take pictures?" Mom replied, "Of course not"—just as another car came up the driveway with Rachel's date and his parents. As soon as Mom realized what was going on, she hurried Rachel into the parents' car and then explained to the reporter that she had made a mistake, and there would not be any interview or pictures.

In addition to playing on the girls' basketball team for four years when I was in high school, I was editor of the school paper, was a cheerleader and entered numerous speaking contests. It was also during these high school years that I became a Christian. Even though I grew up in the Bible Belt, I went to church very little and had notions of God traveling around in a flying saucer. There were many Christians at Rockwall High, and the faith that they shared was a big part of their lives, not just at school, but also at social and sporting events. By the time I was a junior, it was well known that I was firmly



Early in 1963 Oswald posed with the rifle used to shoot JFK. Marina pasted this photo in June's baby book.

JFK

grounded in my strange beliefs, and no one ever bothered to witness to me anymore. But one day in math class I was seated directly behind Kerry Poole, the captain of the football team. I knew that Kerry intended to be a preacher some day, and I had heard him talk to other students about Christ. I had always admired him despite our differences. On this particular day, before class started, Kerry was talking to another guy across the aisle about becoming a Christian, and I began listening instead of ignoring the conversation. I remember the shocked expression on Kerry's face when I interrupted to ask about something he had said. For some reason I opened my ears that day, and that night at home I accepted Christ into my heart. Ever since then my faith has helped me cope with the trying times, including one of the saddest days of my life—the day I learned that no minister would readily bury my father.

The first time I had ever been away from my family for any extended period was my freshman year at the University of Texas in Austin. Mom had been uneasy about my leaving home because she was afraid of who might find out I was an Oswald and try to harm me. We sought out a private apartment complex near the campus that employed a strong security staff, and arranged with the registrar for me to use the name Porter. We did everything possible to protect me from the outsiders, but we forgot about the problem of the insiders.

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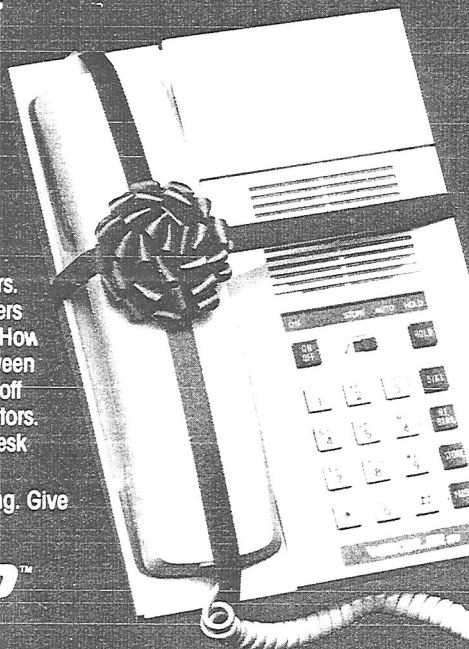
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prepared for it several weeks later, but I remained uptight during the exercise because I kept wondering when something about my father might start coming over the wire.

It is not only the Oswald name I have had to deal with, but other Oswalds as well. After my father's death, his mother and brother, Marguerite and Robert Oswald, helped my mother bury Lee. but in the months following, something that I don't fully understand happened to create an estrangement between Mom, Marguerite and Robert. Whatever the problem was, the fear and distrust they apparently had for each other resulted in my never meeting my grandmother or uncle, even though they both lived within an afternoon's drive of our home. Because of much that has been written about Marguerite, Mom and I were convinced that she was quite crazy and that she had no desire to have anything to do with us. The truth, which I did not learn until after her death nearly three years ago, is that she had wanted very much to see us. I even learned that she had come to my high school once in hopes of seeing me and was turned away by a protective principal. It will always be one of my most haunting regrets that I never insisted on meeting her.

Her death also taught me some of the unpleasant facts about my father's brother. When Mom called with the news of Marguerite's death, I made arrangements to fly home for the funeral. But Uncle Robert called my mother and told her that if we showed up, he would have us thrown out. After a night of soul searching, we decided that the spectacle and the publicity that would result would only produce an unpleasant and disrespectful scene. So we stayed away. Unfortunately for us, Marguerite left no will, and my uncle Robert became executor of her estate. A friend of Marguerite's told us that she had wanted my sister, and me to have her library, probably the most complete collection of material concerning my father. In spite of our strong objections, Robert donated the library to Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, thus depriving my sister and me one last time from having contact with my grandmother's life.

Though we have fought to obtain possession of the library, the matter needs to be pursued through the courts. The

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filmmakers evoking the name of Oswald whenever they want to insinuate evil. I never will.

I find it easier to deal with these situations when I'm with someone who knows my identity than when the subject comes up and I am the only one present who knows. Between my freshman and sophomore years at UT, I spent the summer as a student missionary for Texas Baptists, working in different towns conducting Bible schools, doing religious surveys and related church work. To my dismay, several times during those months I was subjected to unpleasant conversations about my father when my identity was not known. Once I had to sit through a whole discussion led by a pastor's wife of how Lee Harvey Oswald wouldn't have been so bad if he had had a better childhood.

Last fall at the University of Texas, I took an editing course in journalism, which included a lecture on how the assassination and the death of my father could have been better handled by the press. When the teacher started talking about the day that Jack Ruby shot Lee, I found myself shaking. When the class period ended, I couldn't get out of my chair. I just sat there. After the other students had left, my teacher leaned across the table to ask me, "June, are you all right?" and I told her who I was. She simply said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know." I was grateful that she wasn't overly apologetic, and then she told me that every year the lab class does an exercise in wire editing in which they reenact coverage of Kennedy's assassination. At least I was

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Marina and June were joined by uncle Robert and grandmother Marguerite at Lee's funeral.



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could have for the name Oswald came from my roommate. After we had lived together for a few weeks and she had gotten to know me, I decided to tell her who I was. While at first she said it was "neat," in less than a week she demanded that I move, claiming that her father would not allow her life to be put in danger by rooming with me. I was shocked to be rejected solely because of my name and refused to leave. She declared war, finding excuses to argue, and playing practical jokes. Mom was even more upset by this than I was, and she decided to retaliate with a little joke of her own. My roommate was studying a lot more than books, even though her daddy thought she was the perfect and proper student. Mom called her one day and told her that the FBI had been tapping the apartment phone and had tapes of all her conversations with her boyfriends. Mom said she intended to forward these to the girl's father. That shook her up for a while, and she never did know that Mom was bluffing. But the harassment continued. One night I was sleeping alone in our room when I was awakened by the weight of a 200-pound drunken frat rat lying on my back. He started questioning me about who I was and why I would not leave. Though I could hear my roommate talking with some other girls in the next room, none of them came to my aid, despite my cries. He finally left, and the next morning I moved to another apartment. This time I made sure that my roommates knew in advance who I was and that they didn't mind living with me.

Though I have always tried to keep from being branded by the assassination of President Kennedy, it has not been possible to avoid the frequent references to the incident or to Lee. These seem to occur while I'm on a date or in some other situation that can be embarrassing. Once in high school I remember sitting at home with a date watching *Saturday Night Live* when the camera zoomed in on a member of the audience and the words "friendly with Lee Harvey Oswald" were flashed on the screen. My boyfriend stiffened for a minute, and then we both just laughed about it. While on a date to a Woody Allen movie, Woody's character accused his ex-wife of making him sound "worse than Lee Harvey Oswald." I guess the country has gotten used to writers and

"I have always been in awe of my mom," says June. Mother and daughter see one another frequently.



library remains in crates at TCU. No one, not even my sister and I, is allowed to see it.

Not everything that happened to me because of my name has been unpleasant. One rainy night in Austin, I opened the door of our student co-op to find a slightly inebriated Yankee from the college paper who was asking to see June Oswald. Most of my friends in the house knew me only as June Porter, so I quickly ushered him in and began peppering him with questions about what he wanted. We ended up talking late into the night. At some point that evening, he decided that writing the story about me was not worth the risk of revealing my identity and exposing me to potential harm. Not only did Robbie not write his story, he became something of a protector, actively discouraging others from trying to write about me also.

Robbie has become my closest friend and has given me the courage to explore some of my past. One clear night we drove from Rockwall to Fort Worth and climbed the fence of Rose Hill Memorial cemetery looking for my

father's grave. I carried a bunch of flowers, and though we searched in vain for more than an hour, the flowers were placed on a stranger's grave. I have still never seen the place where my father is buried.

Developing personal relationships with other people has been difficult, partly because of my suspicion that anyone who expresses interest might be using me to get to my family. I fear that over the years I have turned away many people who might have been close to June because I was afraid what they really wanted was to become close to Oswald.

When I was growing up, I was very much aware of the many people who spent years of their lives collecting or acquiring data about my father and the assassination. Some of these "assassination buffs" would call my mother, and others I have heard of through news stories and books. I have never understood the reason for their persistence. Some, no doubt, are motivated by sadness and a sense of injustice, while others seem driven just because it is something to do, a game, an obsession. I don't think it should consume anyone's whole life. I resent the fact that so many people expect me to

have a theory about the assassination. All I know is what everybody else knows. The daughter in me believes one thing—what daughter wouldn't want to believe that her father is innocent?—but the person outside the daughter is as unsure of the facts as the next person.

Throughout my life people have thought I have a secret, Oswald-related motive for everything I do. They think I write to someday avenge, that I am outgoing to somehow make up for my father, and that I became a Christian out of feelings of guilt. One well-intentioned teacher even forgave me, after discovering who I was, for being disrespectful of authority figures—he attributed it to "the way I had to grow up." It has been hard to be accepted as June, who is motivated by her Christian faith and the inner strength she learned from her mother.

I always knew that my strong desire for privacy would one day have to yield. I can no longer accept the way my mother, my sister and I have been portrayed. Too much that is wrong and unfair has been written about us, and that's why the girl who wanted to be left alone surrendered to the daughter who knew she had to stand up. □